Is a federal prison really our best bet?

By Mountain Eagle Staff | on May 03, 2023

To the Editor:

In Letcher County, people need jobs and rebuilding after the floods, but a prison is more of a curse than a cure. If prisons really helped economic development, would Florida Governor Ron DeSantis be threatening one in his fight against Disney World?

Prisons are hot spots in the drug trade, and we already have too many drugs. Letcher County had 16 drug overdose deaths in 2021, Knott-16, and Perry-35: most involved fentanyl. People get locked up for drug offenses but are exposed to dealers in prison. “A variety of substances are routinely smuggled into prisons and jails through mail, drone drops, visitors or corrections officers and other staff” and “Forty-seven incarcerated people died of overdoses in federal prisons from 2019 through 2021” and during that same time, federal prison staff administered Narcan “almost 600 times” (The Marshall Project; 12/12/22).

Of the 1,440 people who would be incarcerated in this Letcher prison, 40% or almost 600 already suffer with addiction. Considering the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) barely treats any of those with opioid-dependence, they have little choice but through the underground trade.

Prison time often worsens the poverty of incarcerated people, especially the many who have lower education and income levels than non-incarcerated people, as their children, mothers, partners lose income and spend money trying to keep in contact. Family connection is the most important factor in reducing recidivism, yet incarcerated people may go years without direct physical contact. At neighboring Martin County, the US Penitentiary Big Sandy has mostly incarcerated people from Washington, DC, over 300 miles away. Like Letcher County, there are no buses or passenger trains, and a 600-mile round-trip requires a car, gasoline and food.

A prison will destroy our raptor rescue program at Roxana. Red tail hawks, bald eagles, owls, among others get rehabilitated and released safely back into the wild. The resident falconer previously refused to sell his land to BOP, so they rerouted their Environmental Impact Survey (EIS) lines around his property, but that’s not enough. Rather than having an open space on the forest’s edge, a prison right next to his land will have noise and lights on around the clock, vehicles coming and going, a gun firing range, a stinky
sewage plant churning, where the high level of human activity will totally block healing birds’ need to fly and hunt. Hunters of wild turkey, deer, and squirrel, who pay the landowners to seasonally hunt at the proposed prison site would have to hunt elsewhere.

For economic development, instead of a prison, why not a casino? I mean, if we can’t have a 4-year college or university, solar farms on strip jobs, reforesting them in hardwoods, a museum, planetarium, or wildlife learning center. True, some people have gambling addiction, and some say casinos make money off of sin, (gambling, alcohol), but don’t prisons thrive off sin? Drug offenses, embezzlement, internet crimes, interstate pornography, violence.

Casinos are illegal in Kentucky, but the lottery and betting on horses are legal. Churchill Downs, Keeneland, Turfway, off-track OTB, scratch-off tickets and Powerball generate revenue. Other than alcohol, how different is it from Bingo or betting on the NCAA tournament? Whitesburg allows alcohol sales within city limits and has a whiskey distillery. A casino would have guards but without locked cages.

If the Florida governor’s threat is his way of hurting Disney, perhaps we ought to think twice before betting on a prison here.

ARTIE ANN BATES, MD
Blackey